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The Missing Question

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This is the season when Congressmen send out questionnaires to their constituents on issues they regard as primary. Peter Frelinghuysen, Jr. (R-N. J.) is one of the more alert of his breed and his 12 questions probably represent comparative enlightenment.

Frelinghuysen's first three questions are: "Do You Favor: 1) Federal aid for school construction? 2) Federal aid for teachers' salaries? 3) Federal scholarships for higher education?"

No firm, informed answer is possible on the first of these questions. The basic fact about American education is that school boards spend 74 cents a year per student for books and \$10.74 per year for physical education. We thus waste \$10 for every one we spend wisely. There is an argument for going ahead anyway, of course, but the question should be framed in terms of reality.

Raising teachers' salaries involves also the acceptance of some waste. The average parent is surprised to find that one out of three of his children's teachers is an honestly dedicated human being. That one's salary should certainly be raised, because it is unthinkable that such a man be paid one-fifth of a liquor salesman's salary, and the rest in justice have to be dropped along with him. Federal scholarships for higher education are worthwhile only if Congress is not permitted to attach a loyalty oath rider.

Do you, Frelinghuysen asks, favor medical care for the aged tied to social security? The answer to that—the easiest of all to answer—is yes. Health insurance is a logical extension of social security; and, unlike most federal subsidies, has the advantage of improving matters.

The difference is defined by Frelinghuysen's question of whether the voter favors federal aid for commuter railroads. This cannot be answered, because any reply in the affirmative means accepting the principle that the Federal government should give money outright to people who, on record, promise to waste it.

The Congressman knows the Pennsylvania Railroad and he must also know that its management is incapable of providing decent civilized service no matter how much money the government gives it. Here precisely is the difference with health insurance. Health insurance is sensible because the doctors are doing a good job and the problem is finding a way for people to pay them. But if the American doctor were putting on a mask and dancing around the bed while his patients expired, some enlightened soul would certainly show up to suggest that the death rate could be cut down with a federal subsidy for ju ju potions.

The Congressman asks, for example, whether his constituents favor the Peace Corps. He does not ask for suggestions as to how it should be organized. Yet the government goes on this assignment on the same principle of selecting the incompetent which is suggested for the roads; it seems, in fact, to solicit the advice of persons most conspicuous for their lack of experience with constructive work abroad. If the government wants communications equipment, it goes to RCA; if it wants a Peace Corps, why doesn't it simply contract it out to the Quakers who have been in the business for centuries?

Yet this gets on, and look what is left out. There is not one question about civil rights or about the defense budget, or whether Congress should ask the CIA just how much money it is giving to men in dark glasses and Shantung suits to overthrow Castro, or whether we should go to testing about bombs, or whether the Un-American Activities Committee gives them a thrill of pride every time they see a picture of the Capitol.

I dream of some day knowing a Congressman who would dare ask his constituents questions about the realities of our life. But such a Congressman would, of course, vote his conscience and never take or read a poll.